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Report of the Secretary-General on developments in Guinea-Bissau and on the activities of the United Nations Peace-building Support Office in that country

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 14 of Security Council resolution 1233 (1999) of 6 April 1999, by which the Council requested me to keep it regularly informed and to submit a report to it every 90 days on developments in Guinea-Bissau and on the activities of the United Nations Peace-building Support Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNOGBIS).

2. Members of the Council will recall that, since my last report of 28 June 2000 (S/2000/632), Assistant-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Danilo Türk, briefed the Council, on 2 August, at the Council's request, on the situation along the Guinea-Bissau/Senegal border, during which he highlighted the efforts of the leaders of both countries to ensure security along their common borders.

3. The present report covers developments in Guinea-Bissau since my last report and Mr. Türk's briefing. It focuses on the efforts of the Government to continue to consolidate the democratic gains achieved and to stabilize the situation on the border with Senegal. The report also highlights the UNOGBIS facilitation role towards the attainment of those ends.

II. Political developments

4. I am pleased to inform the Council that, despite some serious internal challenges, Guinea-Bissau's fledgling democratic institutions seemed to survive during the reporting period. When President Yala, in early September, dismissed five ministers belonging to the rival Guinea-Bissau Resistance Party (RGB) from the coalition Government, the RGB and the President's Party of Social Renewal (PRS) engaged in a peaceful dialogue and were able to negotiate a solution that averted the collapse of the nine-month-old Government. Subsequently, the dismissed cabinet officials were reinstated. My Representative, Mr. Samuel Nana-Sinkam, played a facilitation role in this matter.

5. Another positive development has been the normal functioning of the National Assembly. It has successfully debated and approved the Government's four-year economic development programme and the budget for the year 2000. The

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Assembly's Commission of Good Offices is pursuing its search for ways to bridge the differences between the Government and the military, while another military parliamentary commission continues to monitor developments on the border with Senegal.

6. The National Assembly, in collaboration with UNOGBIS, conducted, in June, a five-day seminar on democratic ethics and parliamentary protocols and procedures for post-conflict parliamentarians. Experts from Brazil, Portugal and Mali helped conduct the seminar, which focused, among other issues, on the principles of separation of powers and interaction between State organs and other branches of government. Participating parliamentarians stated that the Seminar had provided a valuable educational opportunity and helped delineate other areas where the international community could offer assistance and expertise in order to make the legislature operate more effectively.

7. To complete the country's post-conflict democratic transition, the authorities have announced plans to hold municipal elections in the course of the current year. In response to the Government's request, the United Nations would provide technical assistance for the elections. Meanwhile, the commission set up by the Supreme Court of Justice to review the current constitution with a view to bringing it in line with the new democratic realities and international norms, has begun its work.

III. Military and security aspects

8. Despite this generally positive background, internal friction as well as tensions along the Guinea-Bissau/Senegal border continue to be cause for concern. The frictions in the border area, resulting from reported military activities in the Senegalese province of Casamance, cross-border banditry and the uncontrolled circulation of weapons in civilian hands, have raised security concerns and dampened inter-State relations. Moreover, communities on both sides of the border have at times spontaneously closed their borders and detained each other's nationals.

9. The temporary closure of border crossings on the Senegalese side led to steep price increases in Guinea-Bissau for fuel and other imports, threatening social unrest at a time when the country's fragile economy continues to struggle even to cover public sector salaries. At the same time, segments of the military have been trying to capitalize on the border instability to increase their visibility in the political process, especially in policy-making on security issues.

10. The leaders of Guinea-Bissau and Senegal, including Presidents Kumba Yala and Wade have continued to work to defuse these tensions. In an encouraging confidence-building move, the chiefs of staff of the armed forces of Guinea-Bissau and Senegal met in Bissau to discuss ways to increase security along the border. In August, a bilateral commission comprising the Interior Ministers of both countries, the Prefect of the Senegalese province of Kolda and the Governor of Guinea-Bissau's province of Bafata as well as representatives of the communities on both sides of the border, met on the Senegalese side to discuss border issues. On 7 September, the Prime Ministers of both countries met in Dakar and signed a document which, inter alia, called on the international community, through the United Nations, to institute mechanisms to complement their joint military patrolling of the border. Following that meeting, the borders were reopened.

11. In a related development, on 5 September, President Yala wrote to me, formally requesting that an international military observer force be established to serve along with contingents from the two countries. I shall revert to the Council on this matter following consultations with all parties concerned.

12. On the internal front, the continued institutional weakness of Guinea-Bissau's national police, including its chronic lack of adequate logistical support, has hampered its ability to deal effectively with the rising incidence of banditry. Meanwhile, a civilian disarmament programme elaborated by UNOGBIS and other members of the United Nations country team to help the Government curb banditry is awaiting international funding, as is the Government's demining programme. In July, a non-governmental organization mine clearance operation led by HUMAID and funded by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland removed over 150 landmines in the capital, Bissau. Recently, the Government of Germany, through UNOGBIS facilitation, provided HUMAID with US$ 150,000 to support additional demining activities.

13. With respect to the demobilization and reintegration of former combatants, the World Bank is providing technical and financial assistance for a Government programme under which about 10,000 soldiers would be demobilized and an additional 16,000 former combatants and veterans would be prepared for reintegration. A pilot demobilization project is expected to commence in January 2001. In the meantime, the Government, in cooperation with UNOGBIS and the World Food Programme (WFP), is providing some 700 soldiers, who have volunteered for demobilization, with daily rations until the formal programme begins.

IV. Human rights situation

14. Out of the 378 political and military prisoners detained since the events of 7 May 1999, only four are still being held. A number of the released detainees have already been formally tried, while others are still awaiting trial. To speed up trial proceedings, UNOGBIS, which has been monitoring the trials, has facilitated the training of new justices and other judicial personnel, some of whom have already been deployed. However, the lack of logistical and financial resources continues to hinder the efficiency of the judicial system.

15. UNOGBIS has continued, in cooperation with the Government, to promote awareness of and respect for human rights in various national institutions. In this connection, UNOGBIS is assisting the Ministry of Internal Administration in setting up human rights training and sensitization programmes for military and police officers and is also collaborating with the Ministries of Justice and Education to integrate human rights issues into secondary school curricula.

V. Economic and social aspects

16. Economic conditions in the country remain difficult. State revenues are disturbingly limited, the level of underemployment and unemployment extremely high and poverty rampant. The Government continues to experience difficulties in meeting the most immediate needs of the population. The responsibility of paying

salaries to almost 26,000 members of the military establishment continues to pose an especially worrisome burden, not only because of the Government's difficult financial situation but also because of high concerns over security, were the salaries not paid.

17. In preparation for the Round Table Conference scheduled to be convened in February 2001, the Government has continued, with the assistance of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to formulate its National Programme of Governance. It has also finalized, with the support of United Nations agencies on the ground, an interim poverty reduction strategic paper to be submitted to the World Bank. Meanwhile, the World Bank has made available about US$ 25 million as a post-conflict credit to allow the Government, in particular, to meet its budgetary obligations, including reducing its internal debt, as well as paying public sector salaries.

18. Health, education and agriculture remain among the Government's priorities. In a positive development, there have been improvements in the productive sector, especially in agriculture, with a striking increase in the harvest of cashew nuts, the country's most important cash crop and its principal source of revenue. In addition, the agreement reached in Dakar in August between Presidents Yala and Wade to increase Guinea-Bissau's percentage of the proceeds from off-shore oil drilling along the border from 15 to 20 per cent could also boost the country's revenue base, especially once large-scale commercial exploitation of the oil fields begins.

19. Given that there is no university or other higher level post-secondary educational institution in the country, a major challenge is to provide young people, who constitute nearly two thirds of the population, with skills and other training opportunities. In this regard, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), with the support of UNOGBIS, has begun supporting a vocational training centre in Bissau, run by civil society organizations.

VI. Observations

20. Guinea-Bissau has continued to make important progress towards consolidating its democratization process. However, the overall situation in the country remains worrying. The ever-present threat of military intervention, the precarious border situation and the country's chronic poverty make the road ahead difficult. The challenges are formidable, and the new civilian Government has neither the means nor the capacity to address them on its own.

21. Despite repeated public statements, the former military junta still seems reluctant to give up the role it played during the transitional period and at times appears to question decisions taken by the democratically elected government. I call once again on members of the former military junta to translate into reality their repeated promises not to interfere in the political process.

22. As regards border security, I wish to commend the untiring efforts of Presidents Yala and Wade to de-escalate tensions along the border between their countries. I hope that the various mechanisms that are in place will reduce the deleterious effects these tensions have had on the prospects for peace, stability and prosperity for Guinea-Bissau and the other countries of the subregion.

23. It is clear that only the people of Guinea-Bissau themselves can reconstruct their country and restore full peace and normalcy. Their resilience and determination to consolidate their post-conflict gains are commendable. However, to meet the daunting challenges outlined in the present report, they need the continued assistance of the international community. I therefore appeal to the international community to assist Guinea-Bissau generously without waiting for the next Round Table Conference, expected to be convened in February 2001.

24. For its part, the United Nations will continue to provide whatever assistance it can to support the Government's national reconciliation and reconstruction programmes. I am grateful to those Member States that have already made contributions to the UNOGBIS Trust Fund and appeal for their continued support to enable UNOGBIS to carry out its mandate.

25. Finally, I should like to pay tribute to my Representative, Mr. Samuel Nana-Sinkam, to the staff of UNOGBIS and to the whole United Nations country team for their commendable contributions in support of the Government's peace-building and reconstruction efforts.